

FROM THE TRENCHES

## Religion and the Public Schools: Serving God to Mammon?

9

---

by Edward G. Rozycki

*There is, indeed, the Unspeakable . . . about which we must keep silence.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup>

### Religion in the Public Schools

In the public schools, we are told, religion may be *taught about*, but not just merely *taught*. That is, religion may be treated in its intellectual aspects only; its other dimensions may be mentioned only if properly reconceptualized as intellectual content—for example, cultural studies. What is to be avoided is *indoctrination* or *inculcation* of specific religious formulary.

But it is far from clear in many educators' minds what this policy permits or forbids. A teacher asks her third-graders to stand in front of the room and tell the class their favorite stories. One boy stands up and begins to tell a tale from the Bible. The teacher refuses to let him continue. This is, on the face of it, silliness. Why is this teacher so cautious?

In another community the tradition of praying at school-community events is apparently conceded to by all involved. When a successful lawsuit stops the practice, the most vocal elements of the community express their shock that the public school could instigate "anti-religious" practice. That misconception lies at the other extreme from the example of the timid teacher.

By failing to distinguish different aspects of religion and by jumping to the conclusion that acceptance or rejection of any part of a religion implies acceptance or rejection of the whole of it, public educators as well as the rest of the school community lose important parts of what is educationally relevant to even an officially secular environment.



## Confusing Different Aspects of Religion

Nothing more muddles the discussion of religion and schooling than failing to mark three distinct and not-infrequently competing aspects of religion: the intellectual, the organizational, and the mystical. The intellectual aspects of religion—more so with some religions than others—consist of a literature, a body of doctrine or claims about the existence of special beings, and assorted formulary that, in the history of Western religions at least, have warranted warfare in their promulgation. Those of us raised in a tradition emphasizing the intellectual aspect find ecumenism either an easy transition or an abomination to the degree we insist that our own belief systems dominate others. *Talking about* religion, rather than *teaching* religion, is either a simple distinction to make or an impossible one.

Organizational concerns emerge from the impulse to community, which in some religions becomes stratified into clergy and laity, often redefining the notion of leadership within that community.<sup>2</sup> The impulse to community may well be the primary reason one finds certain people, otherwise unwashed in theology and unsure of a calling, repairing to church, particularly in times of trouble. A friend in graduate school, long presumed to be a dyed-in-the-wool secularist, startled us all by announcing his entry into a particularly orthodox form of his family's religion. His reason: "Philosophy does nothing for me when it comes to birth, marriage, or death!"

Jesse Ventura, interviewed on the road to election as governor of Minnesota, commented that organized religion was a crutch for the weak-minded. The fury of response sounded in the media was astounding: "Imagine that anyone seeking public office could say such a thing about Religion!" The sanctimonious brouhaha was probably less a case of heart-felt dismay than public hypocrisy along the lines of "Sexual behavior? Tut, tut! Do people really do such things?"

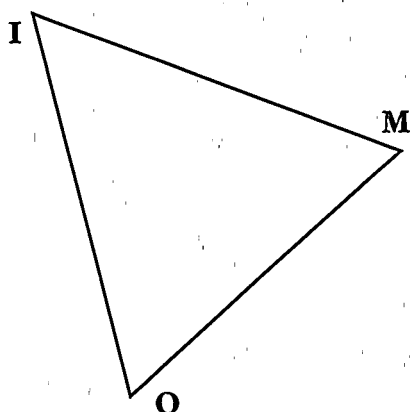
If Ventura had said, "Religion is a crutch for the weak-minded, *my religious community being the exception*," he would have expressed, one might suspect, something the great majority of Americans believe. My childhood religious community certainly taught me to believe that. But then, that community placed great emphasis on doctrine and the importance of separating ourselves from those whose lip service to that doctrine was not up to par.

Mysticism forms the basis for claiming any particularly religious experience at all. It is the fundamental justification for religion and yet, organizationally, its most dangerous aspect. Mysticism tends to be indifferent to doctrine; other forms of it find that the easy God-gabble of the one-day-a-



week worshiper or the politico-cleric skirts blasphemy. Mystics are loose cannon. In some religions they are, in effect, "locked up" in monasteries, since they tend to be seen as subverting church authority, whether resting in the laity or the clergy. What one group may certify as a vision, another will reject as delusion. Joan of Arc, condemned by authorities of the same church that later rehabilitated her as a saint, was burned at the stake. One need only try to engage, say, both Roman Catholics and Baptists in a discussion of Lourdes or Fatima to provoke dissensus over the validity of mystic experience.

An interesting diagram represents the three aspects of religion and the tension among them:



I = Intellectual

M = Mystical

O = Organizational

It is not accidental that moving toward one vertex moves one away from the others. This clearly represents what seems to be the relationship of the three aspects in many religious organizations.<sup>3</sup> (It inadvertently, perhaps, illustrates the possibility of simultaneously serving both God and Mammon.)

### Scientific Prejudice?

Having worked in public schools for more than twenty-five years, I am always puzzled when religious organizations complain about public schools teaching Secular Humanism as a religion. Although Philadelphia is the home of one of the centers of the Secular Humanist Society, I have yet to see its literature distributed in the Philadelphia public schools or hear its representatives speak at school functions. Complaints about Secular Humanism are, I suspect, the paranoia of those who imagine that because their particular doctrines are not welcomed with trumpets at the gates, those of a competing—and presumably radically different, more pernicious—organization are.

But are those who promote Science (with a capital S!) free of religious bias? Unhappily, I cannot answer yes. Most public school people would



12 regard *Scientific American* as the paragon of a religiously neutral publication, unqualifiedly acceptable in the public schools. However, in the March 2003 issue of *Scientific American* Michael Shermer promotes a philosophically biased and anti-religious perspective in the name of Science.<sup>4</sup> What I have referred to here as "mystical," Shermer would class as a complete psychological illusion. He cites psychological studies that are "only the latest to deliver blows against the belief that mind and spirit are separate from brain and body." But the issue is not that some "visions" are delusions and misconstructions; but rather whether all such experience is. Shermer does not hesitate to pronounce on it:

In reality, all experience is mediated by the brain. . . . It is the fate of the paranormal and the supernatural to be subsumed into the normal and the natural. In fact, there is no paranormal or supernatural; there are only the normal and natural—and mysteries yet to be explained. It is the job of science, not pseudoscience, to solve those puzzles with natural, rather than supernatural[,] explanations.

The reality is this: Shermer's claim is at best a surmise. In fact, there is no scientific way to substantiate his claims since he is committing the logical fallacy of arguing from Some to All. That some (or even "all, up to the present") apparently paranormal or supernatural experiences have been shown to be normal and natural does not establish that all, into the future, will be.

Bertrand Russell, on his first visit to the United States, was accosted by a reporter hoping to exploit Russell's reputation as a freethinker and iconoclast: "Is it true, Professor Russell, that you don't believe in the Supernatural World?" Replied Russell, "My dear man, I don't believe in the Natural World!" Even if one does not personally subscribe to the natural-supernatural dichotomy, one need believe neither that there is no "supernatural," nor that only the "natural" exists.<sup>5</sup> Much Western religious thought, though, requires this dichotomy, and religious proponents rightly suspect that an arrogance such as Shermer's might infect the public schools.

### Intelligent Design: The Sectarian Bias

The issue for public education is not whether some formulation is religious or not, but whether it can be believed or disbelieved honestly by reasonable, scientifically educated people. To be avoided are sectarian claims imposed on those who are compelled to attend school—no matter whether those claims originate from within traditionally recognized religions, or whether they are dogmas of more recent professional or disciplinary origin.<sup>6</sup>



One of the latest attempts to “reintroduce” religious content into the public school curriculum appears under the rubric “Intelligent Design.” It is not unreasonable to see the universe as the product of intelligent design, even though there are plausible arguments regarding how it could have come about without such design. A poll of the citizens of the United States would probably reveal that a majority, if not the overwhelming majority, believe in the Intelligent Design Theory (IDT).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, argue its proponents, IDT is not sectarian. There should be no objection to its being taught in the public schools, especially since theories postulating No Intelligent Design are already taught there—read, “surreptitiously indoctrinated”—in the name of Science.

In fact, IDT is highly sectarian, if only because those who propose to introduce it into the public schools have no desire for a full discussion of what Intelligent Design might mean. In other words, if students were to examine human experience for evidence of intelligent design, what kind of designer might they picture behind the world as we perceive it? Considering war, natural disaster, pestilence and plague, hate and pointless suffering, crime and No Child Left Behind, they might reasonably conclude that the Designer is an Evil Demon.<sup>8</sup> Even factoring in a few bright spots—love, fellowship, simple and complex pleasures—they might reasonably conclude that the Designer is at least majorly inept.

I daresay such conclusions would be assiduously opposed by the proponents of IDT. But how could one avoid them in the normal course of teaching unless such teaching became indoctrination in belief about a Benevolent Designer? Nor would such teaching necessarily support the communal aspects of any religious group for the mere fact of having opened up a line of doctrinal discussion. Again, this misguided hope rests on the confusion mentioned earlier among the three different aspects of religion. It is just as easy to conclude that recognizing Benevolent Design compels us to undermine organized religion as to enhance it.

---

*Edward G. Rozycki is a twenty-five-year veteran of the school district of Philadelphia. He is an associate professor of education at Widener University, Widener, Pennsylvania.*

### Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Sections 6.522-7 (my translation—EGR).

2. The impulse toward uniform religious community is one of the human weaknesses about which Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor remonstrates with Christ.

3. Using the triangle as a graph, one could plot different religions as points in terms of



the distance from each vertex the point would fall. The relative distances of a point from each of the vertices would indicate the *inverse* of the proportional importance of that aspect represented by the vertex to the other aspects for that particular religious group.

4. Michael Shermer. 2003. "Demon-Haunted Brain." *Scientific American* (March): 47.

5. Bishop Berkeley's argument that the distinction between the material and the spiritual worlds cannot be established empirically has never been countered.

6. For examples of such dogmas, see Edward G. Rozycki. 2003. "Conjecture Pollution: Poisoning Educational Practice." *Educational Horizons* (Summer):159-161.

7. For example, see Jay Richards. *Intelligent Design Theory: Why It Matters*. <http://speakout.com/activism/opinions/3116-1.html>. There are many articles on Intelligent Design Theory on the web. Not inconsiderable support for IDT comes from the anxiety that morality—therefore social stability—requires religion, an opinion not strongly supported in fact.

8. There is theodicy—the affirmation of divine power over evil. But that approach, being open only to those who appreciate an intellectual approach to religion, excludes most of the groups badgering public education.

### Annual Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

1. Publication Title: Educational Horizons. 2. Publication Number: 0013-175X. 3. Filing Date: September 30, 2003. 4. Issue Frequency: Quarterly. 5. Number of Issues Published Annually: Four. 6. Annual Subscription Price: \$18 U.S., \$25 international. 7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: Pi Lambda Theta, 4101 E. Third St., Bloomington, IN 47401. 8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: same. 9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor: Publisher, same. Editor, n/a. Managing Editor, R.E. Ehr Gott, same address. 10. Owner: Pi Lambda Theta, same address. 11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: None. 12. Tax status: The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during preceding 12 months. 13. Publication Title: Educational Horizons. 14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: Fall 2002-Summer 2003. 15. Extent and Nature of Circulation: Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months/No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date. a. Total Number of Copies: 16,725/16,500. b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation: (1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541: 16,446/16,336. (2) Paid In-County Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541: 0/0. (3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution: 75/67. (4) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 40/11. c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 16,561/16,414. d. Free Distribution by Mail: (1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541: 0/0. (2) In-County as Stated on Form 3541: 0/0. (3) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 61/61. e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail: 15/27. f. Total Free Distribution: 76/88. g. Total Distribution: 16,637/16,502. h. Copies Not Distributed: 90/2. i. Total: 16,727/16,504. j. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 99.5/99.5.



A vertical yellow bar with a red diamond at the top, located on the left side of the page.

#### COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Religion and the Public Schools: Serving God to  
Mammon?

SOURCE: Educ Horiz 82 no1 Fall 2003

WN: 0328803462004

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:  
<http://www.pilambda.org/>

Copyright 1982-2003 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.